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PANEL SAYS SOVIET MAY OUTPACE U.S. IN NUCLEAR SHIPS

Joint Committee Declares
Pentagon Lets Work on
Atom Submarines Lag

M'NAMARA IS CRITICIZED

Group Deplores Refusal of
Funds for a New Project
Proposed by Rickover

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 25—The Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy warned today that the United States might be "unable to counter the rapidly increasing Soviet submarine threat" unless the Defense Department changed its policies on construction of nuclear submarines.

The committee, long a supporter of nuclear power for Navy ships, also criticized the Defense Department for delaying the construction of nuclear-powered surface warships.

It called on Congress to take the initiative in overturning Defense Department policies specifying that all future escort ships for naval striking forces should be nuclear-powered.

The committee presented its views, highly critical of decisions made by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, in a foreword to a 505-page study of the Navy nuclear propulsion program.

The Defense Secretary was criticized for not "moving forward aggressively" with the development of improved types of nuclear attack submarines.

Building Refused

The study brought out, for example, that the Defense Department had been refusing to provide funds for a new type of submarine nuclear propulsion plant proposed by Vice Adm. Hyman G. Rickover, director of the naval reactor program.

"In view of the rapidly expanding and improving Soviet nuclear submarine capability," the committee also found "most questionable" the present Defense Department plans to construct only four more nuclear attack submarines and "then to terminate the nuclear submarine building program."

The committee said it was "extremely concerned that unless immediate and major improvements are made by the Department of Defense in their treatment of the nuclear submarine program, the United States may find itself unable to counter the rapidly increasing Soviet submarine threat."

In testimony earlier this month, made public today by the committee, Admiral Rickover predicted that under present Pentagon plans the United States "in a few years" would lose its numerical advantage over the Soviet Union in nuclear submarines.

Furthermore, he said, it is likely that the Soviet nuclear submarines "will be superior in some respects to ours."

In his testimony, which was

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heavily censored, Admiral Rickover said that while the Russians experienced technical difficulties with their early nuclear submarines, "it is obvious they have overcome these problems and are now building at an increased rate."

Admiral Rickover's appraisal of the Soviet nuclear submarine program was understood to have been supported by secret briefings given the committee earlier this year by the Central Intelligence Agency.

The United States now has 74 nuclear submarines in operation—33 attack submarines and 41 missile-firing, Polaris submarines. Thirty-three more nuclear attack submarines have been authorized.

In his recent statement to Congress, Mr. McNamara proposed to end the construction program by asking for four additional attack submarines—two in the fiscal year 1969 and two in the fiscal year 1970.

The Soviet Union now has some 55 nuclear submarines and is reportedly adding to the fleet at the rate of about five a year.

Lack of Priority Cited

Admiral Rickover complained that while the Soviet Union was pressing ahead with improvements in its nuclear submarines and expansion of its production capabilities, the United States nuclear submarine program was being hampered by lack of priority in the Defense Department and by repetitive "cost-effectiveness" studies ordered by the Secretary of Defense.

As a result of the delays, Admiral Rickover said, the Navy is confronted with a "declining industrial base" for construction of nuclear reactors for the Navy.

On that point he was supported by Dr. Glenn T. Seaborg, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission.

In a letter made public by the committee, Dr. Seaborg said:

"If the United States is to retain sufficient naval nuclear industrial capacity to build reactor plants for the submarines and major surface warships contemplated by the Navy, it is important that a firm, long-range nuclear shipbuilding program be decided upon as soon as possible, so that long-term commitments can be obtained from suppliers."

An example of the difficulty in maintaining the industrial base, Admiral Rickover said in testimony last March, which was also made public today, that Westinghouse and General Electric declined last year to bid for construction of turbine generators urgently needed for a new design of submarine.

Companies 'Too Busy'

The reason given by the companies, the admiral said, was that they were "too busy" on other civilian and military work. But the admiral suggested that the companies preferred to do commercial work because there was more profit there, less design effort and less supervision.

"They want to do business with the Government on their own terms," he said. "For example, recently they wanted to build equipment for a combatant Navy ship on the basis that there would be no specifications, no inspection, and no required delivery date. That was their answer to a request for a bid."

Admiral Rickover told the committee: "It is not proper to draft young boys, send them out to fight and take the

chance of losing their lives, when a large company making profits in the hundreds of millions of dollars can't see its way clear to devote a very small percentage of its effort to help build a ship which is important to the defense of the United States."

The General Electric Company eventually agreed last year to build the turbine generators. The committee said, but only after the submarine project had been "unnecessarily delayed by several months."

While criticizing nuclear companies for not recognizing their obligation to undertake naval nuclear propulsion work, the committee also criticized the Commerce Department for not intervening.

Rebuff for Rickover

The department, the testimony disclosed, rejected a Rickover suggestion that an order be issued under the Defense Production Act of 1950 requiring acceptance of the defense contract.

In view of the Commerce Department's attitude, the committee said, "the Defense Production Act may need to be strengthened to make it possible to procure urgent defense items without the lengthy delays indicated by Admiral Rickover's testimony."

The running battle between Congress and the Executive branch over construction of a nuclear-powered Navy will be rejoined on Tuesday when the House Armed Services Committee opens hearings with Navy witness.